

Seeing Blackness through Black Expressive Culture: A Reading of Zanele Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama* – *Hail the Dark Lioness*

By Mbali Khoza*

*This article examines visual and textual representation of blackness in contemporary black expressive culture. Its primary objective is to discern what blackness means and looks like when seen from the point of view of contemporary black expressive culture. To assess this, I first, briefly, analyze and interpret blackness. Second, I interrogate how contemporary black practitioners critique European ideas of blackness and mirror the complex multidimensionality of black subjecthood by conducting a formal analysis of two pieces of South African artist Zanele Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness* series. Third, I explore the relationship between visual and textual imagery and their involvement in discourses on race. My intention is to reveal the role text and images play and have played in shaping the concept, perception, and representation of blackness; the visual effect they have had on the black imagination; and the heavy responsibility placed on black writers and artists not only to correct these images but to create images for the collective more often than for themselves.*

Introduction

Anti-black visual and textual rhetoric is an example of the many mechanisms that colonial states used to rationalize anti-blackness. According to David Dabydeen, these were “ways to think and speak about the Black presence.”¹ Not only did these rhetorics shape European attitudes about blackness, they also forced black people like Sarah Baartman to participate in their own victimization.² This article examines how these rhetorics, set in motion centuries ago, continue to affect black people. More importantly, it shows how black expressive culture³ is developing an alternative visual and textual language through which blackness can be reconceptualized. To do so it focuses on South African artist Zanele Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness* series. Muholi's usage of

*Lecturer, Rhodes University, South Africa.

1. Cited by Pumla Gqola, *What is Slavery to Me? Postcolonial/Slave Memory in Post-apartheid South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2010), 3.

2. Jim Crow Museum, *The New Jim Crow Museum* (Jim Crow Museum, April 29, 2013).

3. Paul Gilroy uses the term “black expressive culture” to refer to black music. I here extend the concept to black artistic practice in general. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

“race as medium”⁴ to investigate the impact of racial myths on contemporary black existence and on black people’s everyday lived experience. The paper also examines why blackness when imaged and imagined through multimodal visual artifacts can provide multidimensional blacknesses.

What is Blackness?

From its inception, the conceptualization of blackness as signifier of a collective, racial category was instrumental in shaping the construct of race and blackness in both white and black imagination. By constructing racial difference based on color, being “black” meant the opposite of what was associated with being white. Although these racial markers were based on fictional scientific claims, as there is no such thing as a “black” or a “white” gene, the act of endowing bodies with qualities of color legitimized the notion that certain bodies are more meaningful than others.⁵ This comparative color line positioned whiteness as a racially superior identity and relegated bodies identified as black to the status of non-citizenship. Black studies theorist Christine Sharpe writes that this means being in a no-space that the state is not bound to respect.⁶

In apartheid South Africa, being “black” meant being subjected to rules set by whites who arrogated themselves the right to decide on the lives of blacks. The state institutionalized race-based grouping by implementing laws of racial marking and segregation, such as the Pass Laws, the Separate Amenities Act, Bantu Education, and the Group Areas Act, intended to spatially separate black and white and enable the policing and surveillance of blacks. By denying blacks the right to equal citizenship, the state’s sustained racial myths in turn radicalized black subjects, spaces, and experiences.⁷

One of the myths entertained by the white South African state was the use of the word “black” to describe black people, implying that being black is to “look black,” thus having a darker skin tone. The problem with this definition is its exclusion of biracial and mixed-race people who do not appear black in the state’s usage of the term but identify as black. However, biracial and mixed-race people have not always had the right or desire to claim a black identity. Under apartheid, they were assigned to a separate, racially constructed identity called “colored.” Coloredness, writes Mohamed Adhikari, was exactly meant to differentiate a

4. W. T. J. Mitchell describes the term “race as medium” as the production of expressive culture seen through the lens of race. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

5. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 46.

6. Christine Sharpe, *In the Wake of Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 6.

7. Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.

“person of mixed racial ancestry [from] one who is black.”⁸ Both the white government and the colored community, he continues, emphasized the proximity of Coloreds to the white genealogy as justification of their racial superiority over Africans and, thus, to gain certain privileges over Africans. According to apartheid racial classification, “African” signified “black African” rather than an all-encompassing term referencing a shared political and continental identity.⁹ These racial hierarchies still persist in post-apartheid South Africa. Grant Farred observes that “[w]hereas ‘full blackness,’ or Africanness has translated into full citizenship of and belonging to the postapartheid state, colouredness has retained its historic ambivalence.”¹⁰

Rejecting the claim that blackness is a matter of pigmentation, political activist and founder of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, Steve Biko, asserts that “being black” is the reflection of a “mental attitude.” An essential component of this “attitude” is the commitment to fight against all forces that seek to use blackness as marker of a “subservient being.”¹¹ Like numerous other black political movements that sought to liberate black people regardless of geography, ethnicity, or cultural identity, the Black Consciousness Movement, founded in the mid-1960s, was deeply rooted in black solidarity. The success of this movement, as that of the others, depended on blacks recognizing that a collective black identity is the only viable strategy to defeat white domination. Blackness thus became a political symbol of black kinship. In his path-breaking book *I Write What I Like*, Biko describes this as one of the critical objectives of his movement:

It wants to ensure a singularity of purpose in the minds of black people and to make possible total involvement of the masses in a struggle essentially theirs.¹²

We can ascertain from Biko’s interpretation of black collective identity that blackness is a combination of two things: a shared lived experience of white oppression and a shared commitment to the dismantling of this domination. Blacks who rejected these ideals were seen as sell-outs and ostracized by the collective. But, are these binary positions sufficient representation of blackness? Should a shared political interest be the only way to imagine blackness? Is a collective identity always necessary? Biko’s ideas on blackness and collective

8. Mohamed Adhikari, *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identity in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2013), ix.

9. Michele Ruiters, “Collaboration, Assimilation and Contestation: Emerging Constructions of Coloured Identity, in Post-apartheid South Africa,” in Mohamed Adhikari (ed.), *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identity in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2013), 107.

10. Grant Farred, “Where does the Rainbow Nation End? Colouredness and Citizenship in Post-apartheid South Africa,” *New Centennial Review* 1, no. 1 (2001): 182, 183.

11. Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 2004), 52.

12. *Ibid.*, 33.

identity are still drawn on by black South Africans in the post-apartheid present. However, conditions have changed since the apartheid era. Michele Ruiters, for example, points out that since 1994 “identities are in the process of being reconstructed, particularly in opposition to their apartheid-era incarnations, presenting themselves, among other things, as not racist, not divisive and not isolated.”¹³

If European ideas of blackness erased black subjectivity, then the black movement’s urgency to liberate the collective from the annihilation of black subjectivities has performed a second erasure. By erasure I refer to what poet Mary Ruefle describes as “the creation of a new text by disappearing the old text that surrounds it.”¹⁴ Though inherited from the West, blackness is still perceived as a collective identity within black communities.¹⁵ This has affected blackness in the following ways: first, it has delayed the process of reconstructing blackness into a multidimensional identity; second, it has invisibilized the black self; and, third, it has denied the black self the right to redefine its own identity in relation to blackness. In her essay “Invisibility of Blackness: Visual Responses of Kerry James Marshall,” Jesse L. Whitehead equates invisibility to a form of erasure: invisibility is to be “a) unable to be seen and b) treated as if unable to be seen; ignored.”¹⁶ To illustrate how collectivism performs erasure, I refer to a quote by bell hooks in which she describes the relationship of the black collective identity with the “self.”

It is dependent for its very being on the lives and experiences of everyone, the self not as signifier of one “I” but the coming together of many “I”s, the self as embodying collective reality past and present, family and community.¹⁷

Hooks shows that in relation to the black self, most often the pronoun “I” does not signify an individual identity but a collective “we.” I am interested in analyzing discourses that attach blackness to the collective we and the inability of the black self to divorce itself from this collective. It is for this reason, I argue, that discourses on black singularity have remained undeveloped and limited to the

13. Ruiters, “Collaboration, Assimilation and Contestation,” 104, 105.

14. Mary Ruefle, *On Erasure* (Gwarlingo, 2012).

15. In my wider work I understand blackness to be gendered, diverse, and differentiated by class and ethnicity.

16. Jessie L. Whitehead, “Invisibility of Blackness: Visual Responses of Kerry James Marshall,” *Art Education* 62, no. 2 (2009): 33.

17. Bell Hooks, “On Self-Recovery,” in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: Southern End Press, 1989), 30–31.

fixity of “traditional affiliation.”¹⁸ In the following I suggest that undoing blackness’s fixity depends on how “difference” is understood: not just as black and white racial marker but as an indicator of the differences that exist within black communities and amongst black selves, such as those based on ethnicity, gender, and geo-politics. I also make visible how the concept of “blackness” is differentiated by each of these factors if we take their *intersectionalities* into account. Within black feminist discourse, the term “intersectionality” was developed in particular by Kimberle Crenshaw¹⁹ as a theoretical framework to address how black women are “multiply-burdened” by race and gender discrimination.²⁰ Though this is not the study’s primary argument, I draw on intersectionality to examine the multidimensionality of blackness.

Apart from color being the first difference, the second is behavior. I am interested in how blacks’ encounter with whiteness has affected black people. For instance, in post-apartheid South Africa, blacks who have “white” or “model C” accents and “act white” as a result of being in contact with white educational and employment institutions are categorized as “coconuts.” To be a “coconut” is to be considered “black on the outside” but “white on the inside.”²¹ Coconuts’ proximity to whiteness is interpreted as a rejection of their black identity, and in turn has raised suspicions about their relationship with whites. Not only are they not “black enough” but they are also considered “agents of whiteness.”²²

If being a “coconut” is a product of an encounter with whiteness, whether through imposed assimilation or choice, then the term “coconut” makes visible a nostalgia for a pre-colonial blackness that has remained unaffected or untransformed by its interaction with other racial groups and, in doing so, preserved monolithic definitions of blackness. Most importantly, the division of blackness into two categories, Western whiteness and black collective ideas of blackness, has produced dualistic identities. Du Bois describes the experience of this double identity as a being a state of double consciousness. Living in this space of duality, he writes, is a sense of “always looking at oneself through the

18. Michel Foucault defined traditional affiliation as cultural practices that determine the moral standards of society. In his study they are the valorization of marriage and marital obligations, favoring the family, regulating concubinage, and condemning adultery. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, (trans.), Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 41.

19. Other scholars who have contributed to discourses of intersectionality include Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks and Audre Lorde.

20. Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989), 140.

21. Panashe Chigumadzi, *Why I Call Myself a ‘Coconut’ to Claim my Place in Post-apartheid South Africa* (The Guardian, 2015).

22. Ibid.

eyes of another.”²³ British sociologist Paul Gilroy (1993) observes that the practice of separating individuals into ethnic and cultural groups, with race being the overarching link, is a repetition of another form of racism developed by the West during the Enlightenment in response to the arrival of blacks in the metropole.

The political objective of ethnic racism²⁴ was to produce an ethnic absolutism and cultural racism that would maintain the purity of whiteness: an immutable identity, despite its encounter with blackness, and vice versa.²⁵ However, it was based on an inaccurate representation of the impact of transatlantic slavery and colonialism on black identity: blacks who entered the global North were stripped of their diverse cultural identities and forced to accept such conceptualized by the global North. This necessitated blacks living in the African diaspora to construct a new black identity. This situation was further complicated by the fact that the Middle Passage is likely to have been a system of cultural exchange, as Gilroy suggests. He argues that the movement of blacks between continents and across borders produced multicultural identities that transformed both white and black identities.²⁶ For instance, applying this analysis to a more recent period, the entry of blacks into British society in the 1950s challenged and transformed the concept of Englishness and England. The African diasporic experience, as illustrated by Gilroy, thus requires that we reexamine the relationship between blackness and black culture.

If, as Mieke Bal argues, concepts “travel between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographical dispersed academic spaces,” then blackness as a concept can take on multiple identities.²⁷ Michelle Wright, in *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*, describes this kind of blackness as “phenomenological blackness,” a blackness “imagined through individual perceptions in various ways depending on the context.”²⁸ Phenomenological blackness insists that blackness be contextualized. One way to do this, Wright argues, is to explore blackness’s encounter with time and space, which means to consider “when is blackness” in conjunction with “where is blackness.” What distinguishes phenomenological blackness from historical manifestations of blackness is that it operates what

23. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A.C. McClurn, 1903), 3.

24. British sociologist Paul Gilroy observes that the practice of separating individuals into ethnic and cultural groups, with race being the overarching link, is a repetition of another form of racism developed in the Enlightenment by the West in response to the arrival of blacks in the metropole.

25. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 10.

26. *Ibid*, 11.

27. Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 24.

28. Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 4.

Wright terms as “epiphenomenal time” or the “now” denoting a “current moment.” It is not concerned with blackness before and after but with blackness “during” a specific spacetime. By doing so, we will be able to distinguish and account for specific moments and events of individual contemporary black existences from others.

Phenomenological blackness’s primary objective is to undo the fixity of racial stereotypes affiliated with blackness such as uniform ‘black’ phenotype, but more importantly, collective identity. Wright’s study asks, does collective identity matter? Is it the only lens through which to see blackness? Is it enough? Homi Bhabha observes that an “important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness.”²⁹ Fixity, he continues, as the “sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition.”³⁰

For Wright, the first step towards reinventing blackness is to get rid of the notion that all blacks think, behave, and act exactly alike at all times.³¹ Instead, she proposes that blackness should be seen as a singular experience influenced by factors such as time, geography, and culture. The second step is to correct the historical practice of narrating blackness through the monolithic point of view of the black man by centering narratives of diversely gendered bodies that have been erased historically. Emancipating blackness means recognizing the differences that exist within the black community. It means recognizing that blackness does not transcend geography, ethnicity, and cultural identity but is in fact defined and diversified by these very differences. The third step is to liberate the black self from the constraints of a collective black identity, in order to give the self the freedom to “fashion a new sense of self” outside of the collective.³² Michel Foucault describes this act of self-actualization as the “cultivation of the self,” which means “taking care of oneself.”³³ In this context, taking care of the self is interpreted as the right to govern one’s own identity. I want to make a link between Foucault’s concept of cultivating the self and Wright’s phenomenological blackness. I am interested in how Foucault and Wright’s theories on singularity can provide an alternative lens through which black identity can be reimagined.

This introduction contextualizes blackness. It questions its origin and argues why the definition of blackness created in the West cannot be accepted as reflecting reality as it is only a narrow representation of black society. I propose

29. Homi Bhabha, “The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse,” *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 18–36.

30. *Ibid*, 18.

31. Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 13.

32. Toni Cade Bambara, “On the Issue of Roles,” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 108.

33. Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 43.

that this definition can be unfixed by imagining blackness through the various black selves that exist within the black community. The paper now processed to a brief discussion of how visual culture operates when seen through black expressive culture. I then explore how visual and textual representations of blackness seen through the black self can free blackness from this monolithic definition. In my analysis of two photographs from artist Zanele Muholi's series *Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness*, I show how black practitioners are challenging racial stereotypes associated with blackness and raising consciousness about the effect of these stereotypes on black life. I conclude the article with a discussion on the dialogues between text and visual representation.

Blackness Seen through Black Expressive Culture

As pointed out in the introduction, the emancipation of blackness remains unfinished. However, by contesting weak definitions of blackness from the eighteenth and nineteenth century, we can begin to make space for new definitions. But first we must abandon the theoretical frameworks used to fix this blackness and replace them with new ones, such as Wright's phenomenological blackness. In this section I explore what happens when "race as medium" is employed by black creative practitioners. If the former is clouded by racism, what informs the latter?

In his essay "A Mental Tyranny is Keeping Black Writers from Greatness," in which he draws a comparison between the expectations placed upon white and black expressive culture, Ben Okri makes the following observation:

The black and African writer is expected to write about certain things, and if they don't they are seen as irrelevant. This gives their literature weight, but dooms it with monotony. Who wants to constantly read a literature of suffering, of heaviness? Those living through it certainly don't; the success of much lighter fare among the reading public in Africa proves this point. Maybe it is those in the west, whose lives are untouched by such suffering, who find occasional spice and flirtation with such a literature. But this tyranny of subject may well lead to distortion and limitation.³⁴

Okri's assertion is a reminder that, regardless of post-colonial and decolonial discourses, advocacy is required for black creative practitioners to rid themselves of colonial prejudices and take charge of visual and textual representations of black societies, to avoid receiving "information, even about themselves, second hand." Black creative practitioners have been unable to distance themselves from Western audiences' desire for visual and textual narratives in which blackness is a

34. Ben Okri, *A Mental Tyranny is Keeping Black Writers from Greatness* (The Guardian, 2014).

signifier of a universal collective identity without a history (past) or future. Achille Mbembe posits that, in the colonial world, African societies and people of African origin were seen as stationary and “resistant to change.”³⁵ This perpetuates the myth that no progress has been made because of, and beyond, white hegemonies that began with slavery.³⁶ In other words, while black creative practitioners may no longer be tasked with reiterating racial stereotypes affiliated with blackness, such as a uniform “black” phenotype, they are encouraged to create images fixated on the resilience of black societies, thereby fixing blackness to yet another singular narrative.

Njabulo Ndebele’s 1994 investigation of South African literature and culture makes a compelling argument about how black creative practitioners can avoid reproducing images that reduce blackness to a “single, simple, formation.”³⁷ For him, this can be achieved by imagining black society beyond the white gaze. Contemporary visual representation of blackness, he posits, must move away from “abstraction” and reflect “concrete situations.”³⁸ He insists that this can be accomplished by “rediscovering the ordinary.” The ordinary for him implies a thoughtful analysis of black people’s everyday lived experiences, their “inner dialogues with the self” as well as social public dialogues. By doing so, he argues, black expressive culture will start developing “much more complex and richer” visual variations of blackness.³⁹ He thus calls for blacknesses that are not only differentiated by time and geography but also by generation, gender, race, culture, and ethnicity.

Art historian Nicole Fleetwood argues that, given the historicity of blackness, black creative practitioners need to be mindful of the “affective power”⁴⁰ of visual representations of blackness as they can determine how blackness is valued and consumed by black and non-black audiences. She urges black practitioners to change and challenge visual discourses on blackness. This would, in turn, push audiences to re-evaluate their own preconceptions about blackness. Although the weight placed on black expressive culture to “alter [the] history and system of racial inequality” can be burdensome, Fleetwood and art critic Michele Wallace believe that black practitioners must be held accountable for inadequacies and the failure to think critically and analytically about their visualization of black existence. In answer to the question, “how can black creativity become critical of itself?” they argue that we, first, need do away with seeing black as being a

35. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2015), 4.

36. *Ibid.*, 8.

37. Njabulo Ndebele, *South African Literature and Culture: Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 51.

38. Ndebele describes abstraction as a type of imagery that “devalues or ignore the interiority” of black society. *Ibid.*, 42, 48.

39. *Ibid.*, 42, 52.

40. Fleetwood defines affective power as the power to affect how blackness is seen in the black and white imagination. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 6.

problem in the visual field and, second, need to break away from seeing black creative production solely in terms of an ability to produce “negative/positive images” of blackness. Instead, we need to allow the expression of “various perspectives.”⁴¹ Third, we need acknowledge the variation of black creative practitioners by centering the contribution of marginalized communities, such as black women and queer practitioners.

Seeing through race, in this regard, is not only to be critical of anti-black visual cultural representations but to decolonize black expressive cultures’ perception of blackness. In the words of Franz Fanon, decolonization is truly the creation of a new (hu)man. A crucial part of this process is liberating ourselves from the narratives that the colonizers fabricated about the colonized.⁴² In my view, seeing blackness through the black self rather than the black collectivity is one of many strategies that black practitioners can utilize to create space for new, impermanent, and more flexible and diverse versions of blackness.

Seeing through Race

In this examination of black expressive culture’s visual and textual representation of blackness, I am interested in how these images have influenced and continue to influence, the reception, perception, and consumption of blackness. Critical in this is whether and how they explore “phenomenological blackness.” Before I can address these issues adequately, I need to sketch blackness’s fraught relation with visuality. With this I aim to show how visual representations of blackness were mobilized to determine “what is racialised as black: subjects, matter, space experience.”⁴³ The term “visual” refers to visual apparatuses such as television, film, paintings, photographic images, and literature, intended to replicate “everyday life” human experience.⁴⁴ My investigation reflects on the questions posed by African and American literary scholar Wahneema Lubiano who — in her critique of visual culture’s “inauthentic” representations of black life, race relations, gender, and class as “real” — urges us to consider “what happens when these ‘representations’ are accepted as ‘real.’ What happens to the construct of ‘Blackness’ in the public discourse?”⁴⁵

41. Michele Wallace, *Invisible Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 2016), 218.

42. Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (trans.), Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 2.

43. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 2.

44. Nicholas Mirzoeff, “What is Visual Culture?” In Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 3.

45. Lubiano, cited by Wright, *Physics of Blackness*, 4.

The function of modern visual culture, as theorized by Nicholas Mirzoeff, is to “picture or visualise existence.”⁴⁶ Mirzoeff’s definition is geared towards the shift in European modernist creative practice from creating images that seek to replace the world towards a focus on the “visual and its effects,”⁴⁷ a shift that occurred in particular in response to the invention of the camera. It is worth noting that, historically, visual culture is a “discourse of the West about the West,” whose ideologies of visual representation, when exported to the global South through colonization, imposed a universal concept of visual cultural practice, while relegating global South artistic practice to the status of primitivism.⁴⁸ This practice of visualizing existence through various visual apparatuses as “real” or, as Lubiano puts it, as “the real thing” still remains a core component of visual cultural practice.

What is the “reality” of race as such and in what way does it affect how race is manifested in visual culture? What is perceived as “race,” notes W. T. J. Mitchell, is not objective reality but an encounter of fantasy and reality.⁴⁹ To illustrate how the two can be made to work together, Mitchell cites Jacques Lacan’s triad of psychological and semiotic registers — the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real⁵⁰ — as lens through which to critically analyze race representation. Yet Mitchell adds a fourth term: “Reality.” Race, he argues, is reality constructed out of the Symbolic and the Imaginary.⁵¹ This corroborates visual culture’s involvement in the production, circulation, and sustenance of racial myths. Derived from the Greek term *mythos*, a myth is a story or narrative created from a set of beliefs, historical events, or ideas, which is then passed down from one generation to next. However, because myths, unlike science, are untestable, questions can be raised about their validity. Mitchell attributes the conflation of myths with reality and their longevity to the fact that myths are “built with bodies of myths as well as myths about bodies” which are then “constituted as reality that cannot be erased by fiat.” For this reason, he continues, they remain powerful stories that have endured over many generations because they are subject to endless reinterpretation and reenactment for new historical situations.⁵² The repetition of racial myths about blackness, inherited from the

46. Mirzoeff, “What is Visual Culture,” 6.

47. The focus on the visual comprised artists experimenting with a “wide range of complex ideas and modes of representation ranging from over-arching beliefs in progress to theories of the rise of abstract paint or the modern novel.” *Ibid*, 4.

48. *Ibid*, 10.

49. W. T. J. Mitchell, *Seeing Through Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 4.

50. Drawing on Lacan, Mitchell defines the Symbolic as the “realm of law, language and negation or prohibition,” the Imaginary the “domain of images, fantasy, and visual experience,” whereas the Real is “the unrepresentable territory of trauma.” *Ibid*, 16.

51. *Ibid*, 16.

52. *Ibid*, 20, 22.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as “real” through visual cultural representations, has ensured that these ideas continue to permeate representations of contemporary black existence.

Before I discuss what these images look like, I want to address the notion of “representation” and the processes involved in doing the work of representation. Representation, as theorized by Stuart Hall, exists in two shapes. The first is concerned with how to “re-present” things, meaning, mediums, or linguistic codes used to present a “thing.”⁵³ The second is the meaning that a “thing” procures from this re-presentation and is an indicator of how we feel and think about it.⁵⁴ But these thoughts and feelings need to be contextualized as they do not exist in a vacuum. We must consider what informs them, thus whether they are shaped by myths, cultural or religious beliefs, or prejudices, and why seeing through this lens can produce what W. E. B. Du Bois calls the “second sight.” He equates seeing through the “second sight” to seeing through a veil, screen, or any apparatus purposefully designed to distort our perception.

In the essay “Black Women are Standing in a Crooked Room,” political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry compares mass media reproduction of racial stereotypes and caricatures⁵⁵ associated with black American women to standing in a “crooked room.” Developed post-World War II by cognitive psychologists when researching an individual’s ability to locate themselves in space, the crooked room was designed to assess whether participants would be able to differentiate between a distorted and an upright room. Participants were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and asked to align themselves vertically. The purpose of the study was to assess what they perceived to be the “up right” and whether they could successfully align themselves to the room. Black women, Harris-Perry argues, are like these participants, located in a crooked room in which they are forced to see themselves through the eyes of others and subjected to how others see them. Those who retaliate against these images struggle to figure out which way is up.⁵⁶ What Harris-Perry’s argument points to in the context of visual culture is that the vision of its practitioners is impaired by racial myths that determine, or contort, how blackness is seen and not seen. Ultimately, the myths determine how we see, what we see, and what we do not see. To quote

53. Linguistic codes mean the use of signs and images to stand for or represent things.

54. Stuart Hall, “Introduction,” in Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 9.

55. With “caricature,” Harris-Perry refers to the stereotypes of the mama, jezebel, the angry black woman and the sapphire. Melissa Harris-Perry, *Black Women are Standing in a Crooked Room* (Jezebel, 2012).

56. Ibid.

art historian Iris Rogoff, the racial myths determine “whose fantasies of what are fed by which visual images.”⁵⁷

Mitchell characterizes visual practice influenced by racial rhetoric as the “visual language of race.” He considers it a consequence of seeing through race. It is therefore essential that we review the relationship between representation and race: race, he cautions, is “not merely a content to be mediated, an object to be represented visually or verbally, or a thing to be depicted in a likeness or image, but the trace itself, a medium and an iconic form — not simply to be seen, but itself a framework of seeing through or (as Wittgenstein would put it) seeing as.”⁵⁸ When we reconceptualize race as a medium, says Mitchell, we are capacitated to consider how the concept of race⁵⁹ was used as an excuse, alibi, or explanation for racism.⁶⁰

What happens when race as medium is employed by black creative practitioners? If the former is clouded by racism, what will inform the latter? I would argue that black creative practitioners are drawing on Wright’s phenomenological blackness as a lens through which to see and image blackness. My analysis of a selected case study will show how they are achieving this. It also shows why seeing blackness through phenomenological blackness, rather than the collectivity, has allowed them to image blackness from “various perspectives.”

Race as a Medium in Zanele Muholi’s *Somnyama Nognyama* – *Hail the Dark Lioness*

As theorized by Hall, representation involves the use of language to construct meaning. Hall’s use of the word “language” is not limited to written text; it can signify images, sound, electronically produced images, musical notes, and even objects. In other words, it is any medium that can stand for or represent a concept, idea, or feeling.⁶¹ In the same vein, my use of the term “black expressive culture” is not limited to, and does not seek to privilege, visual images over other modes of representation; rather it is a formal analysis of the visual⁶² and textual. This section now turns to explore how each of these mediums separately or jointly contributed to discourses on blackness and how blackness is seen, or not

57. Iris Rogoff, “Studying Visual Culture,” in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 16.

58. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, 13.

59. Citing Kwane Anthony Appiah, Mitchell reminds us that “the truth is that there are no races.” *Ibid*, 14.

60. *Ibid*, 19.

61. Hall, “Introduction,” 1.

62. With “visual” I refer to paintings, photographs, drawings, sculptures, video installations, and performance art.

seen. It also assesses whether there are any distinct differences or similarities between the two, and whether they complement or supplement each other. I use Zanele Muholi's artworks as a basis to discuss this.

In his essay "What is Visual Culture?," Mirzoeff reminds us that, historically, nineteenth-century Western civilization privileged the spoken word and textual over the visual representation. For creative practitioners, the emergence of the "visual" provided alternative modes to picture the world, other than in linguistic terms. But what is the difference between the "word-as-text" and the "world-as-a-picture"? According to Mitchell's "picture theory," the difference lies in the

realisation that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practice of observation, surveillance and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interoperation etc. ...) and that "visual experience" or "visual literacy" might not be fully explicable in the mode of textuality.⁶³

In other words, the ability to "read" and interpret visual images does not necessarily mean one is equipped to "read" the written text. For Mitchell, reading the written requires a different form of linguistic literacy, one that is attuned to how text conjures up sight.⁶⁴

Zanele Muholi's *Babhekile II* and *HeVi*, from the series *Somnyama Ngonyama – Hail the Dark Lioness* (2016), serve as perfect examples for their⁶⁵ use of image and text. Muholi is a South African artist and queer visual activist, well known for their use of portrait photography to commemorate and celebrate the lives of Southern African "black lesbian, bisexual and transgender humans."⁶⁶ This consciousness-raising work — like that by many other black artists who use visual culture to represent the social and political lived experiences of black people — makes visible the discrimination, inequality, and injustices black people face. The series, Muholi reprises portraiture to tackle the "perpetual violence on black bodies in the mainstream media and the politics of exclusion."⁶⁷ By inserting their own self into their work, Muholi is able to assume multiple identities: author, subject, and object. The self-portraits are personalized by a selection of props, each intended to represent their personal experience with racial profiling and black life across spacetimes. These props also act as visible cultural signifiers of blackness or black ethnicities. What they signify is pointed to by Muholi's strategically crafted titles.

63. T. J. W. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 16, emphasis in original.

64. *Ibid.*, 6.

65. Muholi prefers to use the plural pronouns their/they/them instead of she/her.

66. *Financial Times*, Zanele Muholi: 'I'm a Visual Activist' (Financial Times, 2018).

67. *Ibid.*

Central to this body of work is the notion of blackness. Muholi examines the “cultural borders”⁶⁸ established through skin, particularly “black” or dark. They⁶⁹ do so by darkening⁷⁰ their skin color. This gesture, the artist explains, is an attempt to “reclaim” blackness, an identity they feel is “continuously performed by the privileged other.”⁷¹ The tradition of blackening the skin to signify blackness can be traced back to white American minstrel shows originating in the mid-1800s.⁷² These shows were predominantly owned and staged by white performers who darkened their skin with black cork to portray what white America at the time perceived to be “real” caricatures of “black plantation life in the South.”⁷³ In his book *Black Manhattan*, civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson observes,

minstrelsy was, on the whole, a caricature of Negro life, and it fixed a stage tradition which has not yet been entirely broken. It fixed the tradition of the Negro as only an irresponsible, happy-go-lucky, wide grinning, loud laughing, shuffling, banjo playing, singing, dancing sort of being.⁷⁴

Covered in blackface and with exaggerated bright red lips, performers dressed in “baggy clothes and floppy shoes to achieve a comic effect and to maximize the contrast” between themselves and the “well-dressed ‘straight’ characters in the show.”⁷⁵ Psychologist Chanbani Manganyi identified as “one of the legacies of [the] colonialism of Africa ... the development of [a] dichotomy relating to the body, namely, the ‘bad’ and ‘good’ body.” Dividing the body into two racially defined categories enabled the colonial state to project the white man’s body as the “standard, the norm of beauty, of accomplishments” and the black body as “inferior and unwholesome.”⁷⁶ Within the context of American society, the characterization of African Americans, using practices such as blackface, as a visual extension of the state’s anti-black rhetoric, founded during slavery and legitimized by the Jim Crow segregation laws, is yet an example of how these narratives infiltrated every space of American society. The popularity

68. Cali Coetzee, *Written under the Skin: Blood and Intergenerational Memory in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University press, 2019), 9.

69. Muholi prefers to be referred to by the plural pronoun.

70. Muholi does not psychically darken her skin. Their skin is blackened by the photography post-production processes that heighten the contrast within the images.

71. Stevenson, 2012–2018, *Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama* (Stevenson, n.d.).

72. Henry Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Sourcebook on Early Black Musical Shows* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2014), 7.

73. *Ibid*, 13.

74. James Weldon Johnson, cited by Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 20.

75. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, vii.

76. Chanbani Manganyi, *Being-Black-in-the-World* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1973), 28.

of blackface, as the only and authentic representation of African-American life, is a reflection of what happens when, as mentioned earlier by Lubiano, anti-black narratives depicted through various visual apparatuses are accepted as the “real thing.”

While Muholi’s blackening of their skin can, at first glance, be interpreted as the reproduction of these anti-black tropes, it does the contrary. It draws our attention to how skin was and still is the primary medium through which the body is racialized. The use by black creative practitioners of the medium of the blackface is not new. Henry Sampson observes that “many white and black performers used burnt-cork makeup during the early 1900s.”⁷⁷ However, their use is unlike that by Muholi whose images consist of various props intended to reflect the multi-dimensional black identities that exist within black communities. African American actor George Walker claims that black performers who participated in minstrel shows were expected to mimic anti-black stereotypes staged by their white counterparts:

All that was expected of a colored performer was singing and dancing and a little story-telling, but as for acting, no one credited a black person with the ability to act. Blackfaced white comedians used to make themselves look as ridiculous as they could when portraying a “darky” character. In their make-up they always had tremendously big red lips, and their costumes were frightfully exaggerated. The one fatal result of this to the colored performers was that they imitated the white performers in their make-up as “darkies.” Nothing seemed more absurd than to see a colored man making himself ridiculous in order to portray himself.⁷⁸

In *Babhekile II* (see Figure 1), which loosely translated from isiZulu means “they are watching,” Muholi explores blackness’s historical relationship with surveillance. In the photograph, the artist looks over their shoulder as if to suggest that they are looking at themselves in a mirror.⁷⁹ However, the title and their gaze suggest otherwise: they indicate that Muholi is being watched and is aware of it. It is not clear who is watching. But if the work is seen through race, Muholi’s pose and gaze illustrate the effect that constant surveillance can have on an individual’s behavior.

77. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 1371.

78. George Walker, cited by Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 1371.

79. Simon Abrahams, *Over-the-Shoulder Poses* (EveryPainter Paints Himself, 2011).



Figure 1. Zanele Muholi, *Babhekile II*, Oslo, 2015, Silver Gelatin Print, Image 50 x 37.7cm

Source: Stevenson Gallery.

The prop included in the image suggests a specific type of surveillance. Covering their hair, sits a small travel bag. The title reminds us that this is no ordinary bag. It is symbolic, a metaphorical representation of black experience with racialized spaces. To be more specific, it interrogates the consequences of travelling while black. During apartheid, spatial divisions were enforced by the Pass Laws enacted in 1952 by which black South Africans at all times had to carry a passbook or “dompas” (literally a “dumb pass”), restricting and surveilling their movements. It contained a “person’s name, fingerprints, photograph, personal details of employment, permission from the government to be in a particular part of the country, qualifications to work or seek work in the area, and an employer’s reports on worker performance and behaviour.”⁸⁰ In the United States, Victor Hugo Green published *The Negro Motorist Green-Book* in 1936 in response to segregation laws forbidding African Americans from occupying spaces designated as white. It served as a travel guide for African Americans who were not familiar with the black-owned hotels and businesses in the states they travelled to. In the introduction, Green writes that the book intends to give the

80. Bianca du Plessis, *Carrying Apartheid’s Book* (IOL, 2015).

“Motorist and Tourist a guide not only for the Hotels and Tourist Homes in all of the large cities, but [also for] other classifications [taverns, restaurants beauty shops, barber shop, petrol stations] that will be found useful wherever he may be.”⁸¹ Sampson describes black minstrel performers’ encounter with white Americans’ spatial racial prejudices:

In many cities, hotel accommodations were not available so the performers had to find room and board in the private homes of the local black citizens.⁸²

Not only did Green’s guide help black performers find these alternative spaces, but it provided them safe spaces that were free from racial prejudice. In her essay “Why People of Color Need Spaces without White People,” Kelsey Blackwell explains why these spaces are necessary:

People of color need their own spaces. Black people need their own spaces. We need places in which we can gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes and marginalization that permeate every other societal space we occupy. We need spaces where we can be our authentic selves without white people’s judgment and insecurity muzzling that expression. We need spaces where we can simply be — where we can get off the treadmill of making white people comfortable and finally realize just how tired we are.⁸³

Although South Africa and America have both done away with segregational laws, their long-lasting effects are still visible. In South Africa, apartheid architecture continues to separate rich whites from predominantly poor black population. The segregation that remains in America’s present-day society is illustrated in the 2019 documentary *Traveling While Black*, directed by Roger Ross Williams. It draws links between the Jim Crow laws and police brutality. In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes a letter to his black son about white America’s racism. Reflecting on the deaths from police brutality of Eric Garner, Renisha McBride, and Tamir Rice, he writes:

And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction.⁸⁴

81. Victor Hugo Green, *The Negro Motorist Green-Book* (New York: Victor H. Green, 1936), 1.

82. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 31.

83. Kelsey Blackwell, “Why People of Color need Spaces without White People,” *The Arrow* (August 9, 2018).

84. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2019), 9.

Similar to Coates, Muholi's *Babhekile II* is a visual reminder of how racial profiling operates and, even more importantly, continues to permeate contemporary black life, and by doing so hindering black social mobility.

Muholi's *HeVi* (see Figure 2), which is slang for "heavy," supports Patricia Hill Collins' assertion that anti-blackness is intersectional, or a form of "intersectional paradigms." For Collins, "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type"; rather, oppressions "work together in producing injustice."⁸⁵ In *HeVi*, Muholi wears an Afro wig. Similar to black skin, black hair was and still is subjected to anti-black prejudice that privileges straightened black hair⁸⁶ over "untidy"⁸⁷ hair. Black hair also became a signifier used by some to identify blacks whose skin did not "look" sufficiently black to allow an easy racial identification. In cases where the fairness of the skin did not allow a clear racial classification of an individual, the apartheid government devised the "pencil test" to separate colored and black bodies from white ones. The pencil test, writes Amanda Uren,

decreed that if an individual could hold a pencil in their hair when they shook their head, they could not be classified as White.⁸⁸

The primary objective of the test was to address a significant fear within white communities: the infiltration of white society by non-white bodies "passing as white." In recent years there has been a resurgence of a natural hair movement, supported by tutorials on YouTube on natural hair and scholarship on the dangers of chemical relaxers, encouraging black women to embrace their natural hair and stop straightening it. The movement gained in popularity in the 1960s and 1970s through activism by groups such as the Black Panther Party and the civil rights and black consciousness movements. The Afro became a symbol of political resistance. In an interview on natural hair in 1968, Kathleen Cleaver of the Black Panther Party explained:

The reason for it, you might say, is a new awareness among black people that their own natural appearance, their physical appearance, is beautiful. It is pleasing to them ... For so many, many years we were told only white people were beautiful. Only straight hair, light eyes, light skin was beautiful, and so black women would try everything they could to straighten their hair and lighten their skin to look as much like white women ... But this has changed because black people are aware, ... and

85. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 2000), 9.

86. Straightened black hair, also called "good hair" in the United States, mimicked European straight hair. Its proximity to Western hair is seen by some blacks as prettier or better.

87. SBS News, South African School Told to Halt 'Racist' Hair Policy (SBS News, 2016).

88. Amanda Uren, *1950–1990: Signs of Apartheid* (Mashable, 2015).

white people are aware of it too because [they] now want natural wigs ... They want wigs like this [points to her natural hair].⁸⁹



Figure 2. Zanele Muholi, *HeVi*, Oslo, 2016, Silver Gelatin Print, Image and Paper Size: 100 x 75.5cm

Source: Stevenson Gallery.

In 2016, black girls at the Pretoria High School for Girls led a protest against their teachers who described black hair as “untidy.” An unnamed pupil told Panyaza Lesufi, the Member of the Executive Council in Gauteng for education, that “I have a natural Afro, but a teacher told me I need to comb my hair because it looks like a bird’s nest.”⁹⁰ Muholi’s *HeVi* is a recognition of how black hair too is burdened by anti-blackness.

89. Educational Video Group, *Kathleen Cleaver: Interview on Natural Hair* (Greenwood, (IN: Educational Video Group, 1968), 2 mins.

90. Karabo Ngoepe, *Black Girls in Tears at Pretoria School Hair Protest* (News24, 2016).

The Complex Relation between Text and Visual Representation

Images, according to Mitchell, are signifiers, and what they signify can be determined by a formal analysis of their content. Captions, however, operate differently, as they represent a “mental image conjured by a verbal signifier.”⁹¹ Muholi’s work is an example of this complex relationship between image and text. Since images are “prior to [the] word in the model of language,” it is likely that viewers of Muholi’s images will first attempt to interpret the images before trying to decipher the word-image relationship.⁹² What differentiates words from the image is the way in which they signify an object or thing: in Muholi’s case, the words point to issues pertaining to blackness and surveillance. However, Mitchell insists that the relationship does not end there but that there is a “third element”: language’s representation of the spoken word and the ideas held in the mind. This means that when we “read” Muholi’s work, we are “reading” the image as a picture, a mental/metaphorical idea and as a spoken word. What distinguishes each of these elements is their function: each is dependent on the way in which it makes meaning.⁹³

Both Mitchell and Mirzoeff agree that the image can never erase or replace textual representation or claim to be an equivalent of it. When the two do intersect, visual experiences make reading and understanding linguistic discourse more “comprehensive, quicker and more effective.”⁹⁴ The paradox of visual cultural analysis, however, is that it relies on language for meaning, but that “language is a limited and incomplete means of description and cannot fully explain or replace the work of art.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, because artworks are not fixed to singular meaning, they remain ambiguous. Meaning, argues Hall, can “only be shared through our common access to language.”⁹⁶ When readers/viewers do not share a common language, a sign or symbol inserted or represented in an artwork can take on multiple meanings and might be interpreted differently from one context to another. Mirzoeff thus posits that the “visual image is not stable but changes its relationship to external reality.”⁹⁷ This ambiguity is reflected in Muholi’s photographs: visual images representing the “intersectional paradigms” of race, a byproduct of anti-black stereotypes that have come to be accepted as “real.” By doing so Muholi interrogates visual culture’s concept of “reality” or what it deems to be “real.” In addition, the words “babhekile” and “hevi” compel

91. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, 7.

92. Ibid.

93. Ibid, 8.

94. Mirzoeff, “What is Visual Culture,” 7.

95. Alan Simpson, “Language, Literature and Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics Education* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1988), 48.

96. Hall, “Introduction,” 1.

97. Mirzoeff, “What is Visual Culture,” 7.

us to consider how words, like images, are unstable. These words, for instance, like most words, have multiple meanings depending on their context.

Mitchell claims the difference between the visual and the verbal has two facets:

one grounded in the senses (seeing versus hearing), the other in the nature of signs and meaning (words as arbitrary, conventional symbols, as distinct from images as representations by virtue of likeness or similitude).⁹⁸

Muholi's works is a reminder of how and why images are created and understood differently to text. The reason is that images were historically and continue to be reliant on visual objects whereas textual representations are dependent on a careful selection of words to construct an image, or narrative. Importantly, because a text does not provide a visible image (visual objects we can see), the reader is required to see images through another form of sight: through the imagination. This is why, in Mitchell's opinion, textual representations are superior to visual ones: the "images we see while listening to the radio"⁹⁹ are better, more vivid, dynamic, and vital."¹⁰⁰

I, however, am not interested in whether the one is superior to the other. What I am interested in is the separate and joint contribution of both mediums to the articulation of phenomenological blackness. I am also interested in how Muholi practices what Mirzoeff theorizes as postmodernist visual and textual practice to destabilize and rewrite modernist¹⁰¹ ideologies, in order to visualize the "genealogy, definition and function of postmodern everyday life." To ensure class, gender, sexual, and racialized identities are correctly represented, Mirzoeff describes this new method of representation as a "visualisation of things that are not in themselves visual." For the European modernist creative practitioner, the visualisation of existence meant prioritizing the "visual and its effects." These "effects" can be described as artists' experimentation with a "wide-range of complex ideas and modes of representation ranging from over-arching beliefs in progress to theories of the rise of abstract painting or the modern novel" in an attempt to distance itself from "imitating objects."¹⁰² Muholi's work is an accurate visual representation of visual culture's original function, and how postmodernist artists are experimenting with other forms of representation.

98. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, 4.

99. For Mitchell, sound or audio is another form of textual representation.

100. Mitchell, *Seeing through Race*, 6.

101. Okwui Enwezor reminds us that modernism cannot be divorced from its historical ideas of Europeaness that justified global imperialism. Okwui Enwezor, "Reframing the Black Subject: Ideology and Fantasy in Contemporary South African Representation," in Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor (eds.), *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 2.

102. Mirzoeff, "What is Visual Culture," 5, 6, 4.

What we can ascertain from Muholi's work is how complex the interrelationships between images and text are. Yet they also complement and extend each other. More importantly, the artist's work illustrates how both medium's production of "cathartic, coded and advanced" representations of black existence can help deepen our understanding of blackness.¹⁰³

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103. Wallace, *Invisible Blues*, 216.

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